



# Catholic Faith, Life & Creed

Doctrinal Catechesis Sessions for adults based on  
the Church Year, the Liturgy, & the Sunday Scriptures

## Breaking Open the Word

by Mary Birmingham

## 23<sup>rd</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time | Year C



*True Cross*: Italian Painting, Early Renaissance, Agnolo Gaddi, 1380

“Whoever does not carry his own cross and come after me “cannot be my disciple.” Luke 14:26



## Begin with the Sign of the Cross

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

### Opening Prayer

Option 1. Use Opening Prayer from the Sunday Liturgy.

Option 2.

### *Prayer for Generosity*

*St. Ignatius of Loyola*

*Eternal Word,  
only begotten Son of God,  
Teach me true generosity.  
Teach me to serve you as you deserve.  
To give without counting the cost,  
To fight heedless of wounds,  
To labor without seeking rest,  
To sacrifice myself without thought of any reward  
Save the knowledge that I have done your will.  
Amen.*

Catholic  
**Faith, Life  
& Creed**  
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Breaking Open the  
Word worksheets  
connect with *Catholic  
Faith, Life, & Creed*  
Doctrinal Sessions.

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## Liturgical Context

- ▶ The Gospels of these weeks are from the section of Luke's Gospel that takes place "on the way to Jerusalem." It is a journey every Christian must take.
- ▶ The Gospel reminds us that we are all called to take up our cross for the sake of others—it is our Christian responsibility.
- ▶ The reading from Wisdom is a reminder that only through the power of the Holy Spirit are we called, empowered and strengthened to live a life of discipleship.
- ▶ The entire liturgy is a call to radical, self-sacrificing love.

Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions in groups of two, and then surface insights in the wider group.

- ▶ What spoke to your heart in today's liturgy?
- ▶ What reading, symbol, music, homily, spoke to you and why did it speak to you?
- ▶ What touched you the most in today's Gospel?

If time is a consideration, omit reflection on one of the readings.

## Reading 1: Wisdom 9: 13-18

- ▶ The Book of Wisdom is among the last of the books of the Old Testament; it is not included in the Hebrew canon.
- ▶ It was a commonly held assumption that Solomon is the author; however scholars long ago refuted that proposition and understand Solomon's authorship simply as a literary device.
- ▶ The author was probably a Jewish, Greek-speaking educated teacher and philosopher.
- ▶ About six decades before the birth of Christ Alexandria was an intellectual center. The Book of Wisdom was written to strengthen Jews to avoid assimilation in the multi-cultural, pagan center that was rife with philosophies antithetical to the Gospel.
- ▶ Philosophy set out to answer the ultimate questions of existence. Why do the rich flourish and the poor and righteous endure hardship?
- ▶ Faith was challenged and ridiculed. Skeptics ruled the day. Intellectualism and individualism thrived.
- ▶ Jews flirted with these competing philosophies and many turned away from their traditional beliefs and Jewish practices in favor of current ideologies.
- ▶ A theology of afterlife emerged after the exile. The afterlife was considered a shadowy place (Sheol) where God was absent.
- ▶ Thus it was believed that God's judgment occurred on earth. Signs of that judgment were obvious. Wealth, family, possessions were signs of God's favor. Poverty and sickness were signs of God's judgment.
- ▶ The author of today's pericope (section of reading) insists that we are limited human beings who are unable to clearly discern the will and the ways of God. We are limited in our ability to discern what God wants of us and for us.
- ▶ Human beings need the gift of God's *Wisdom* in order to discern the things of God. Human beings need the power of God's Spirit to discern the mind and the

heart of God.

- ▶ Genesis theology asserts that all creation is good. The Wisdom author is not buying into Platonic belief that spirit is good and matter is evil. He simply believes that because human beings are mortal and subject to death they are limited in their capacity to understand the workings of God.
- ▶ God's Spirit necessarily helps human beings discern God's will.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two, and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a “brief” story from his or her life. See appendix #1 for an example.

- ▶ What is the Good News in this reading?
- ▶ What philosophies today compete with Christian thinking and teaching?
- ▶ Where do skepticism, intellectualism, and individualism rear their ugly heads in our culture today?
- ▶ How do you know the will of God for your life?
- ▶ What is the will of God for your life?
- ▶ The belief that wealth is a sign of God's favor and sickness is a sign of God's judgment still exists today. Where is it evident in contemporary culture?
- ▶ The theology that spirit is good and matter is evil still exists today. Even certain Christian religions deny the Genesis assertion that God created human beings good. How do we reconcile sin and evil in the world with the truth that God created all things good? What are the implications and challenge for our lives?

### Second Reading: Philemon 9-10; 12-17

- ▶ Paul's authorship of this letter is not disputed.
- ▶ The way in which the letters are organized in the canon of the New Testament is length. They're arranged from the longest to the shortest. Philemon is the shortest.
- ▶ The letter was written to the Philemon family. Their slave—Onesimus—ran away. Philemon was a Christian from Colossae. Paul converted Philemon.
- ▶ Onesimus went to be with Paul in prison. He knew that Paul was highly regarded by other Christians, especially his master. Paul not only converted Philemon but he also converted Onesimus
- ▶ Paul sent Onesimus back to his master and wrote to Philemon on his behalf.
- ▶ Paul would have loved to have Onesimus join his evangelization efforts but he knew that Philemon had rights over Onesimus.
- ▶ He implored Philemon to consider the slave his brother rather than a slave. Christianity proffered a new status—equality in the reign of God—equal citizens.
- ▶ As Christians they were united to one another in a covenant bond through

baptism.

- ▶ Paul alludes to his desire that Philemon free Onesimus from slavery so he could participate in the work of evangelization.
- ▶ He pleads on behalf of Onesimus that Philemon not punish him.
- ▶ Paul did not set out to change the societal code of slavery; but he did ask that love be extended to the slave. He asked that the new Christian relationship rooted in agape love be honored and respected. (Slavery was not considered immoral until the nineteenth century.)
- ▶ Paul was a champion of the theology that all are free in Christ. There is no Greek, no slave, and no free person. All are equal children of God.
- ▶ Onesimus' name means "the Profitable One". Paul hopes that this slave will live according to the promise of his name.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in groups of two and then surface brief insights in the wider group. Catechist responds with a "brief" story or reflection from his or her life. See appendix #2 for an example.

- ▶ In what way, if any, is the letter to Philemon a relevant word today?
- ▶ Imagine how much Paul was asking Philemon to stretch beyond society's norms. Paul was asking Philemon not to punish his slave (his property over which he had the rights of life and death). Paul was further asking him to consider him an equal. In that culture it would be tantamount to asking the President of the United States to welcome a homeless person to dinner and a night in the Lincoln bedroom. He was asked to stretch his compassion, Christian love and mercy to the limits. In so doing he was risking serious cultural shame. Paul is asking Philemon to extend love. It sounds easy, but it is a self-sacrificing humiliating love he is asking him to extend. What possible scenario in today's culture could possibly ask for this same kind of love to be shown to a person or group of persons? What would it cost a person today to offer such love? What are the implications?

## Gospel: Luke 14, 25-33

Read or summarize the Gospel, perhaps provide a copy of the text for further reflection.

## Gospel Exegesis

Please note: catechist may intersperse the questions at the end of the exegesis throughout your presentation where appropriate.) Catechist invites participants to respond to the following questions before presenting the exegesis.

- ▶ What specifically touched you in this Gospel?
- ▶ What does this Gospel mean to you?



- ▶ Luke's intention on this road to Jerusalem section of the Gospel is to dramatically illustrate the last leg of Christ's journey to Jerusalem.
- ▶ Jerusalem is the place where human destiny will be fulfilled—thus it is a city of destiny.
- ▶ The tension mounts as the journey continues.
- ▶ Large crowds follow Jesus “on the way” giving the impression of a solemn procession leading to the ultimate liturgy celebrated on the ultimate altar of sacrifice.
- ▶ He uses the journey to punctuate his last instructions to a band of followers not yet committed to the ultimate implications of his mission which he unfolds ever so painstakingly and slowly on this journey, culminating in his message today.
- ▶ Jesus has been trying to break through the consciousness of his disciples throughout their journey. He tells them:
  - “I resolutely begin my ultimate and last journey to Jerusalem where both glory and suffering await me. I met a man along the way who wanted to become a follower. I warned him about the rigors of discipleship. Disciples are called to be homeless wanderers like me...disciples must be ready to leave one's family and to offer one's very life.”
  - Two parables illustrate the implications of this discipleship. First the tower builder could either choose to build the tower or not build the tower. He simply has to think through his options in the abstract. The king, on the other hand, does not have that luxury. He must make a decision as he has been invaded by twice the force of his own. He has to act. The implications? It is important for disciples to understand what it means to accept the call of discipleship and what it means to reject it—what are the implications of both decisions? Disciples must be fully aware of what they are saying yes to. Those who want to follow must be focused—just like the plowman is focused when he tills a straight row in his field.
- ▶ Today's Gospel, albeit the entire liturgy, is a catechism on discipleship.
- ▶ The call of discipleship is not some pious abstract thought—it requires action and it requires commitment.
- ▶ Discipleship requires that we be willing to swim upstream against the current of popular opinion and society's demands.
- ▶ Discipleship demands that followers of Christ embrace the Gospel's challenging implications.
- ▶ The Christian walk is not easy. It sometimes requires that we give up everything. It sometimes asks us to be willing to be ridiculed, oppressed, demeaned, scoffed at, belittled, minimized and regarded as stupid and irrelevant for the sake of the Gospel. There is no greater marginalization in the American culture than to endure the former.
- ▶ Jesus' listeners in this pericope (section of reading—pronounced *per-ih-ku-pee*) seem to be the marginalized of his society—those he had just invited to the eschatological banquet—the lame, the blind, the poverty stricken.
- ▶ To be invited is merely the beginning; there is more expected.

- ▶ Believers must be willing to take up their cross and die if need be for the sake of the Gospel and for the sake of others.
- ▶ Such is the call of baptism. Such is the call of radical discipleship. It is why heroes and heroines such as Maximillian Kolbe can stand in front of his Nazi oppressors and say, “Here, take me instead” when they were about to kill a young man in the concentration camp. It is why the nuns in South America were willing to be killed in pursuit of empowering the poor in El Salvador.
- ▶ This was not a mandate extended only to the Twelve Apostles; it is the call of every Christian.
- ▶ The literal translation of this Gospel asserts that we are to “hate” our relatives and ourselves. This appears to be extremely antithetical to the Gospel.
- ▶ The word *hate* in the original Greek is the opposite of agape—love. It is a word that designates action, not emotion.
- ▶ Matthew softened the wording. Luke makes no such concessions. Luke’s audience knows the implications of following either a committed call **to** follow the Gospel, or a lackadaisical call **away** from it. A lackadaisical call can easily come about as a result of an over attachment to family and material possessions.
- ▶ Luke is imperative: when one is distracted, one cannot hear God’s call and embrace the true, radical demands of Gospel living. Period.
- ▶ One who has an extraordinary attachment to possessions simply is unable to be prophetic. We must attach ourselves to God and detach from our worldly possessions and concerns.
- ▶ A person must be willing to let go of family ties if he or she is truly willing to go the entire distance with Christ.
- ▶ Matthew asks us to **accept** the cross. Luke exhorts us to **bear** it. Luke wants it on our backs—he wants it to cut into our skin—to become one with us.
- ▶ The parables echo the implications of the discipleship to which we are called.
- ▶ The tower parable is only found in Luke’s Gospel. Do not build the thing unless you have what it takes to complete the project and see it through to the end—no matter what it costs you—even if the price is your life. Bottom line? All of our human desires, wishes and projects must be secondary to God’s will.
- ▶ In these two parables, Jesus warns those who are disciples in training of the necessity to assess their own strength and prepare for what it will take to follow through. Such preparation involves the development of what is needed to persevere and endure—the practice of self-denial.
- ▶ Discernment of one’s strengths is crucial, says the Lord. The great Egyptian mystic, the Venerable Anthony the Great writes: “Many virtues are excellent, but sometimes, due to lack of ability or excessive enthusiasm, harm can result from them... Discernment is the virtue which teaches and disposes a man to follow the straight path and not turn off at crossroads. If we follow the straight path, then we shall never be lured by our enemies, either on the right - toward excessive abstinence, or on the left - toward negligence, carelessness and laziness. Discernment is the eye of the soul and its lamp”, writes Venerable Anthony the Great. “...By discernment, a man sorts out his desires, words and deeds and steps away from all those which remove him from God”.



## Mystagogy

### reflection on the mysteries

Catechist invites participants to respond to one or more of the following questions in small groups of four. Use the last three or four minutes to surface the insights in the wider group. Catechist begins by sharing story from his or her life. See appendix #3 for an example. (@ Ten-twelve minutes)

- ▶ What speaks to you the most in this Gospel? In what way is this a relevant word for us/for you today?
- ▶ In what way have you or are you bearing the cross for others or for the Gospel?
- ▶ What distracts you in your Christian journey? What keeps you from growing in intimate union with Christ? What in this world are you overly attached to so that it gets in the way of your relationship with God?
- ▶ What does discernment mean to you? How do you discern God's will for your life?
- ▶ Have you ever had the experience of being asked to do something so difficult that you never thought you would have the strength to follow through? Would you do it again if you were asked? Were you successful? Can you look back on the experience and see God's hand in it? What are the implications of this? In other words, what does your experience teach you about God?

Catechist invites participants to silently reflect on the following question.

- ▶ After reflection on today's liturgy, what one thing is God asking of you at this time in your life?
- ▶ What obstacles stand in the way of following God's call?

### CONCLUDING PRAYER

Repeat OPENING PRAYER for this session OR

Minor rite: Blessing: 95-97.



## APPENDIX

#1. I have discerned the will of God for my life simply by looking back on my life. There is a Jewish metaphor that helps us understand God's will. It is the image of a rowboat. We row into the future with our backs to it because as we row into the future we are looking at our past. Thus, I know the will of God by looking at my life to acknowledge the patterns and the way in which God has guided me through the twists and turns.

I know the will of God for my life by the passions he has placed within me. I believe God resides in the desires of our heart. God has placed within me a passion for Scripture and for the Christian kerygma. I have always prayed that God gift me with zeal to proclaim bold message of faith. It is what "floats my boat!" I believe God placed that desire within me. Herein lays his will for my life. The extent to which I have been attentive to the fulfillment of that desire is the extent to which his will for me becomes more obvious. God has placed within me a passion to proclaim a just word and preach the Good News. He further gifted me with the necessary gifts to accomplish that will and he laid straight the path before me.

It is up to me to respond to God's will and to pray in harmony with the Holy Spirit that I accomplish that will in my every day life.

#2. Perhaps we could make a correlation with Paul's request that Philemon welcome back his wayward slave with the illegal immigrant situation of today. Many people resist the US Bishops call for immigration reform that includes a path to citizenship. They think it is akin to cheap grace. Many people, Christians among them, want such people deported to a life they long ago left behind and a life that means death in many cases. One afternoon a young man entered our church. He was weeping. I went to him and asked him if I could help him. He asked for a Bible in Spanish. He felt hopeless and thought God had abandoned him. He had just been fired from his job because his boss feared getting in trouble with authorities. The man came here because he and his parents were starving in Mexico.

He illegally entered this country in order to support his aging parents. He worked hard and sent the money back home to help his parents. He now feared deportation to a home that no longer exists, to parents who both died in the past year and to a place where no employment is possible.

Paul's words to Onesimus could ring through to us today asking us to extend a love that is extremely unpopular in our culture. Perhaps Paul is asking us to extend help to such people. Perhaps we are being asked to advocate loudly for such people and to help them in any way we can to find solutions to their untenable situations. There is no place in the world for the illegal immigrant. Too many are eager to say it is someone else's problem, when perhaps Paul is reminding us that today's "slaves" are absolutely equal to us in the eyes of God.

How would we feel if we were the ones in danger of deportation when all we are asking

is to become contributing members of society? Perhaps Paul is challenging us to get involved and at the very least to change our hearts to have compassion for their plight.

#3. I once had an experience in parish ministry in which someone warned me that at our next meeting I would be roundly attacked for how things were going. While I always believe we need to be open to reasonable criticism as it is often times our path to growth, I knew this was borne out of other agenda that in reality had very little to do with their stated agenda.

I prayed for the wisdom to speak with God's voice. I prayed, "Lord, that you may increase, and I decrease!" I did not know what I was going to encounter. I am not a person that loves confrontation; I usually avoid it if at all possible. This was going to be a confrontation unlike any I had experienced before.

I decided there was nothing I could do but pray. Much like the king with his half-sized army I felt there was nothing I could do to stop it. It was coming regardless of what I chose to do. I asked the Lord for strength and for the ability to speak with his mind and heart. As it turns out I was given the strength through prayer.

I learned that on my own power I am powerless in such things, but when I turn to God for strength I can do all things through him. As the words came forth from me I could hear a quiet little Scripture passage float to my consciousness: "Do not be afraid when you are dragged before kings and courts for I will give you the words." And indeed God gave me the words. They were healing, reconciling words of authority. They were so contrary to what I was feeling. I wanted to lash out, but I yielded to the words that flowed from within.

It was a turning point in the group; everyone reconciled. I learned that I truly can count on God at such times. I learned that I may not have what it takes at the outset, but with prayer, perseverance and a commitment to turn my life over to God, I can trust that God will give me what I need.



# Connecting Liturgy with Catholic Doctrine

Possible doctrinal themes that flow from this week's  
Liturgy of the Word and Eucharist

Cross & Paschal Mystery  
Holy Spirit  
Prayer  
Catholic Social Teaching

Moral Decision Making  
Jesus Christ  
Eucharist Series

Other themes may be chosen as well--choose from the scope and sequence chart and create your own connecting statement. The following statements make the appropriate connections between the doctrinal issue you have chosen and the liturgy of the day.

## CROSS AND THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

Today's Gospel is an exhortation for the disciple to pick up his or her cross and carry it for the sake of others—the heart of the Paschal Mystery. When we participate fully in the Paschal Mystery of Christ we are willing to embrace the cross of struggle and the cross of victory in our everyday lives. We are willing to die for the sake of others just as Jesus died for us. Thus, today would be an opportune time to reflect on the CROSS AND THE PASCHAL MYSTERY.

## HOLY SPIRIT

Today's first reading, albeit every liturgy, is an invitation to reflect on the power of the Holy Spirit in our lives. The Holy Spirit is the active agent, the presence of God within the Eucharistic Assembly. It is therefore opportune to reflect on the Holy Spirit and his role in our lives. Today our extended session will focus on the HOLY SPIRIT.

## PRAYER

Today's Book of Wisdom is a reminder to seek the will of God in all things. We can only know the will of God by entering into reciprocal relationship with God. We nurture that relationship through a life of prayer. Thus, today our extended doctrinal session will focus on PRAYER.

## CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING

Paul exhorts Philemon to go beyond society's norms and consider the slave Onesimus an equal child of God with rights and dignity as a child of God. Such is the heart of the Gospel of Christ. This is the heart of CATHOLIC SOCIAL TEACHING which is the focus our extended doctrinal session today.

## **MORAL DECISION MAKING**

The Gospel today reminds us that we are called to make good decisions—decisions that are not always easy to make. God invites us to discern his will for our lives and to live a moral Christian life. In order to remain faithful to the discipleship to which we are called, we must make correct and right moral choices. Thus the focus of today's extended doctrinal session will be MORAL DECISION MAKING.

## **JESUS CHRIST**

Jesus is on the way to Jerusalem. Tension is mounting. He continues to present his catechism on Christian discipleship. Awareness of the fullness of who he is and his mission will only become evident after his death. Now he prepares the way by teaching his disciples everything they would need to know to continue his mission after he returned to his heavenly throne. Thus, today, albeit any Sunday, would be an appropriate time to focus our attention on JESUS CHRIST.

## **EUCCHARIST SERIES:**

Our premier celebration of the Paschal Mystery—the life, passion, death, resurrection, ascension sending of the Spirit is made manifest and re-presented for us in the Eucharistic liturgy. Today we will focus on part \_\_\_\_ of the Eucharistic Series.